

# Street Vending and Design Thinking: A Provocation

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The spontaneity of make/do culture of street vendors in Bangkok is an example of the practice of integrative thinking and contextual praxis that predates and parallels the postmodern integrative and contextual advocacies of Design Thinking. It is materialized as resourcefulness and flexibility in the eclectic creation of vending stalls whether mobile or otherwise, and also as the improvisational intervention of street vendors in public space. It taps into the indigenous cultural condition of Buddhism of ‘an aware mind’ which according to Julia Cameron is the state of creativity. Contemporary designers can learn from the practices of the street vendors in Thailand. As such, Thai street vending reveals a link between Thai culture and Buddhism, and Design Thinking.

## I. Design Thinking

In the past 20 years design has become mainstream. The emergence of celebrity designers, the ever present push for differentiation in the marketplace, and advances in consumer-grade design software, has spurred a proliferation of form. This new visibility and capacity demands that professionals distinguish themselves from the pack of increasingly skillful ‘non-designers’. Design thinking responds to this call. Design thinking emphasizes the design process, the manner in which designs are developed, prior to design development and production. Design Thinking promises a designed outcome that precedes Photoshop in the design process, retaining a corner of the design world for specialists and those highly trained.

Design Thinking promises methodology that improves design outcomes, sparks innovation, and maintains the integrity of design as a thoughtful and relevant practice. From the perspective of design history, Design Thinking breaks from a modern utopian vision along a linear trajectory and sees opportunities in embracing multiplicity, complexity, participation and systems thinking. A user-centered approach utilizing rapid prototyping and co-design requires designers to be quick-thinking, responsive and flexible in their problem solving. Appreciation for other voices has further flung open the doors to Design to invite other specialists—content experts and users—into the design process in earnest. Participatory design promises a more inclusive process in which design is merely facilitated by professionals, who through the course of the process, gradually cede their control over design outcomes while fortifying other participants with design skills. These team collaborations between disciplines and with potential design users give voice to each perspective. Because design is increasingly acknowledged as an activity that manages complexity, it is also no longer thought to be confined to the realm of objects. We now see opportunities for design in the planning and strategizing of organizations, services and operations. The designer becomes part of the decision making process of the ‘big picture’ using design as a way of thinking rather than “the narrow application of formal skills” [1].

However, Design Thinking is dependent on the mastery of specific skills as generators of outcomes contributing to process or methodology. Emphasizing teachable skills, and implementable processes, Design Thinking strategies such as Min Basadur’s ‘Simplex’ have in common variations of elements that can be categorized into two groups, ‘design skills’ and ‘design phases.’ In our analysis, it is the process skills rather than the process phases that can be linked to Design Thinking and street vending. In addition, we identify attitudes that are helpful for designers to adopt when engaged in Design Thinking processes.

### Design Skills

Design process skills are competencies associated with successful implementation of a design problem solving process. They are considered teachable—anyone can learn and apply them. Design process skills relevant to our analysis include the following:

### **Divergence**

The ability to think *divergently*—to come up with numerous ideas quickly, indiscriminately, and in a non-judgmental way—is a critical step in the Simplex process especially, and is less emphasized yet still critical in other design methodologies. Divergence values quantity over quality—‘no judgment’ is an operational state in which everything that comes to mind is valid and worth capturing.

## **Convergence**

The ability to think *convergently* requires a shift in mental state from that of pure generation of ideas to one in which editing and assessment are important. Effective consideration of criteria and the designer's ability to identify promising ideas is the key to this important skill. While the quality of a convergent stage is dependent on a voluminous divergent one, convergence ability to recognize the potential of unusual ideas or 'diamonds in the rough' is critical to the quality of the design process as a whole.

## **Design Attitudes**

### **Flexibility and Responsiveness**

Design Thinking processes are by nature cyclical, in other words once a process is completed and an emergent design has been implemented and evaluated, the evaluation becomes the subject of the initial phase of the next cycle of design development. Moving from phase to phase by responding to the new knowledge gained as one goes through the development of a design requires flexibility in order to respond appropriately to the new conditions. The ability to be flexible—to modify one's ideas based on new inputs while maintaining project goals—is critical in innovation. Design Thinking is meaningless without this attitude and the ability to accept and generate change.

### **Empathy**

The ability to empathize with others is not central to the methodological structure of Design Thinking, which focuses on a step-by-step process, but it is critical to its success. Empathy puts the experience of the users of design at the center of the design process—it reminds designers that there are 'real people' who are affected by design and puts a human face on the production of goods and services. It is not a specific action but rather an ability or skill to connect and make meaningful the designer's relationship to his/her end user.

### **Deferral of Judgment**

Disregarding a need to continually assess, measure, and assign value to ideas is key to the effectiveness of this mindset. Deferral of judgment removes preconditions that limit problem solving processes and opens up possibilities that would not make it through more restrictive methods.

## **II. Buddhism**

Buddhism has been introduced to Thailand for centuries developing as the core of its culture. The teachings of Buddhism guide us to know the 'nature of things;' [2] that things are impermanent, life is suffering and there is no individual self. Therefore, grasping and being tempted by desire are fruitless. Buddhism teaches these principles through meditation and the Four Noble Truths—that there is suffering, suffering is from attachment, suffering can be ceased, and that ceasing the cycle of suffering is possible through following the principles of The Noble Eightfold Paths, a guide for mental and moral improvement [3]. When insight is reached, and one comes to accept the fleeting nature of all things and the existence of suffering, one gains a different perspective of the world. This is when the creative instinct emerges. Julia Cameron makes this connection: "So both Buddhism and creativity involve the art of listening to the heart. That's where the creative impulse arises from. That's why I cannot distinguish between creativity and spirituality." [4]

Buddhist principles may be seen as running parallel to attitudes advocated by Design Thinking. Design Thinking's values of openness (divergence, deferral of judgment), empathy, and responsiveness, correspond to Buddhist concepts of mindfulness, compassion, and impermanence. These principles, in essence, are not purely religious, yet produce a state that is optimum for creativity. Buddhism cultivates these states through meditation (in the case of Thailand, Vipassana meditation or insight meditation, a practice that is taught in Theravada Buddhism), which elevates one's understanding of the 'nature of things' or mindfulness, the basis of the teaching of Buddhism. From mindfulness, one realizes that all things are fleeting. Hence, the inclination towards flexibility.

The belief that our existence is interconnected is also inherent to Buddhism. You exist as an individual while at the same time, you are also connected to others forming the whole. Buddhism has always seen how the part plays out in the whole and how the whole is comprised of related parts. This network functions simultaneously in a universal system, such that the malfunctioning or the cure of a

certain part will ultimately affect the other parts. This interdependence culminates for the practitioner of Buddhism in a state of compassion for others. Empathy is its Design Thinking correlate.

Buddhism being part of Thai society has osmoted into the everyday lives of the people surfacing as subconscious acts of intuition. Despite of Buddhism's position as a religion, its by product is engrained as the creative ways of being. This is seen in the culture of street vending in the make shift attitudes towards street vending stalls and the street.

### **III. Vending**

In essence, the make/do culture of street vending, Buddhism and design thinking intersect as they place significance in the idea of integration and context fostering conditions that encourage creativity or in Buddhist terms, a mind of awareness. However, because of the contextual framework of make/do within a culture that has been influenced by Buddhism for centuries, these values become engrained and have become habituated behaviors of Thai people. This deep rootedness presents itself as intuition in the resourceful attitudes of street vendors.

Everyday the streets of Bangkok are shaped by the improvisational culture of street vendors, a phenomenon of organic territorialization. Sidewalks are intended for pedestrians but have become shared space between commerce and pedestrians. Commercial transactions range from the sales of clothes, accessories, knick knacks, to food and drinks. Tables and stools line sidewalks transforming a portion of streets into open-air restaurants — some remaining the whole day while others disappear during off-peak hours. These gatherings reconstruct the urban space into communities and bazaars that are created by citizens operating under an organic social structure.

Just as improvised are the street vending stalls themselves. Stall components are usually gathered from local surroundings and are selected not according to original purpose or intent but for re-purposing. Buddhism's view of change and impermanence fosters an open mindset in which the vendors see possibilities in objects and materials as solutions to design problems. This flexible mindset is indeed what is advocated by Design Thinking as it sees it as a process that is pertinent to innovation.

The Buddhist concept of transience also makes it easier for vendors to accept change, experiment, and take risks. This is apparent in the culture of street vending from the process of creating the stalls to the vendors' temporary occupation of sidewalks as both possess the boldness of the experimental spirit – one in the use of materials and objects, and the methods of construction; the other, in the use of space. Stalls are not fully finished as they lack the refined touches, but invite imagined constructions and reconstructions. The vendors' transient intervention in public space suggests an unfixed view of the world appealing to an open system.

These creative solutions are manifestations of an ability to take in volumes of inputs and from them distill appropriate responses. In the design process, these inputs are created by the designer in the divergent phase: their analog here is the result of a porosity of thought that admits inputs indiscriminately. It defers judgment as does the mind of the designer in a divergent stage. This porous, open mind then shifts into an analytical phase that narrows the voluminous mass into reasonable ideas, a convergent stage that is concerned with judgment and determining the best fit to the problem. Duangrit Bunnag, a well-known architect in Thailand, states "...creativity is a holistic process that occurs all at once in order to generate a new vision. Significant elements for creativity are details and bits and pieces of unrelated information which can be connected. Only with an individual who can see all those bits of elements in a holistic way at the right timing, even the least smart person may naturally conceive creativity." [5] In the case of street vendors, the holistic views of Buddhism embedded in Thai culture plays a role in their creativity. Their openness to the vast possibility of solutions parallels that of the Design Thinker in the divergent stage of the design process.

#### **Case Study: Glasses and Mango Snack**

Her stall that sells glasses and mango snack occupies a small area at the corner of Soi Convent in Bangkok. Through the years, her products have changed from time to time. The display of her glasses is configured on a step-like structure that is covered with synthetic fur so as to add presence and a level of sensuality to them. The design of her stall is mostly based on lightweight and ease of mobility. The main structure, originally used for a lottery stand, is made of metal tubes. A gridded metal frame creates the top and plastic baskets act as elevated platforms. As for the display of the mango snack, it is but two stools stacked one on top of another, topped by a tray containing the snack. Home and locally found objects of different nature have been given new meaning in another context and have found commonalities to coexist with each other. These are responsiveness to conditions of the environment, the products, and the vendor's own needs. Adaptability and optimization become forces of creativity. (Image 1 – 5)

## CONCLUSION

The connection between street vending in Thailand and Design Thinking is bridged by concepts in Buddhism in Thai culture. But while Design Thinking claims that the competencies of divergent thinking and responsiveness may be cultivated and learned through training, they require specific competencies of flexibility and empathy to make them effective. The process is only full and complete when designers are in possession of the competencies and apply them generously to the process steps. Design Thinking, when it emphasizes the process steps over the competencies, thus fall short of its promises of enhanced design.

Considerations for context, both immediate and historical, are manifest in the design of vending stalls of Bangkok. The utilization of materials at hand and the many part of their construction and workings make them open systems that can be modified to accommodate fluctuations in weather, foot traffic, availability of commodities, the physical limitations and properties of the vendors themselves. Exposed to the public and the vicissitudes of the city, they are models of responsiveness and flexibility, and in their adaptation from canal to street to stall, models of successful practice. Looking toward the vending carts in the streets of Bangkok can serve as a reminder of these attitudes, while standing as an example of strengths of Buddhist attitudes in supporting a creative process.



Image 1  
Street vending stall



Image 2  
Display of glasses



Image 3  
Components of stall



Image 4  
Components of stall



Image 5  
Display of mango snacks

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